

The Courage to Raise Your Hand

Owen Gadeken



The scene, which occurred many years ago, was all too familiar to me: A new leader with a new program. Gone were my days as a manager on Air Force missile development programs. I had just joined the faculty at Defense Systems Management College to teach program management. We had a new commandant, an Air Force brigadier general, who was ready to revolutionize our capstone program management course. In due fashion, he assembled his team of faculty and staff and announced he had a new vision for program management training in the Department of Defense. We would create a new course with a single evolving program as a central theme. We would cover the entire acquisition life cycle using a series of case studies based on this single program. Furthermore, we would construct the new course as a living program so student decisions could be incorporated to change the scenario as it evolved. This ability to adjust the case on the fly would allow students to actually see the impact of their early decisions on program outcomes.

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As he went on, I remember saying to myself, "What an innovative concept, but it will never work in our system." We had up to 300 students going through the course at a time. If student groups were allowed to adjust the scenario as they went along, we would have an enormous configuration management problem. Also, the bulk of our cases studies came from real-world programs where we had actual cost, schedule, and performance data. Where would we get the data to feed to each group as they departed from the baseline scenario? Our faculty prided themselves on meticulous preparation before teaching each case study. What type of faculty would it take to respond to this constantly changing scenario? Negative fantasies raced through my mind as I wondered what would happen if we adopted the commandant's proposed approach.

After concluding with a comment about how this would revolutionize our educational process, the commandant said he was interested in our candid feedback on his proposal. My instant reaction was to think, "Sure, he's interested in feedback so long as it supports his idea." Having been through situations like this many times before, I resolved to keep my mouth shut and was certain my colleagues would do likewise. Even if the vision proved futile, which was highly likely in my opinion, we would just wait a couple years for the next commandant to rotate in with another vision.

So I anticipated the usual prolonged and uncomfortable silence followed by a politically correct question or two. But this was not to be, as my colleague Don raised his hand and stood up to speak from the back of the room. "Sir, with all due respect, your vision won't work," he said. "I admire the concept, but it is too complex for our students and faculty to execute."

I couldn't believe Don was saying that publicly, and I wondered about the consequences. Perhaps the commandant would let Don stay on for a few weeks before he terminated Don's faculty appointment (all faculty members were on excepted service term appointments). Or maybe he would just reassign Don to one of our new regional offices—a sort of exile.

After giving Don time to outline his position, the commandant responded immediately. He surprised us all by praising Don for the courage to voice an opinion counter to his vision. The general went on to say that he encouraged people to state their honest opinions even if they were not in agreement with his or other senior leadership positions.

Even after this statement by the commandant, many of us continued to expect negative fallout from Don's challenge to the general's vision, but it never came. Don kept his viewpoint and his job, and actually became the commandant's favorite lightning rod for candid feedback on any new proposals. And the commandant's vision? It never came to be. We worked hard on it and had some success in our pilot offering. But in

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the end, Don was right. It was too complex for both faculty and students to execute.

Don't Shoot the Messenger

Ironically, there were several positive effects resulting from that experience. Don's "free to speak your mind" example was not lost on the organization. Other faculty and staff gradually felt more empowered to offer their candid views about ongoing projects. Even though the commandant's vision ultimately failed, we learned a great deal from the experience that we incorporated as improvements to our existing program management courses. We also kept the spirit of experimentation and allowance for failure alive and well at the college. We continued to try new approaches. Even if they didn't succeed, we always learned valuable lessons from the process.

As I think back on this incident, it stands out clearly as one of the turning points in my career in program management training. While it seemed like an almost trivial event at the time, it reinforced the value of praising rather than shooting the messenger.

The same scenario can play out in acquisition program offices, as explained by one of our course's frequent guest speakers at the time, Robert "ChedBob" Chedister, who as a colonel had been the program manager of the Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) program at Hanscom Air Force Base, Mass. When he took over the program, Chedister discovered that the program's cost estimate was significantly understated (by more than \$1 billion) to buy the 19 aircraft

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required. He dutifully reported this to his senior Air Force leadership and was immediately rebuffed. He came back a second time and was again turned away. Chedister's boss then hired a retired Air Force two-star general who worked with him for the next two and a half months. At that point, the retired two-star reported that Chedister was actually \$1.2 billion short, whereupon the two-star was fired on the spot. Chedister was then given a retired four-star general to help him get to the "right" cost number. After three and half months, the retired four-star reported that the program was actually \$1.4 billion short, but he knew a way to save \$0.4 billion (making it back to the original \$1 billion shortfall).

This time, no one was fired. The Air Force argued about the cost for the next two years and finally gave the \$1 billion to the program manager after Chedister. Chedister bought 13 aircraft, and the Air Force ended up with a total of 17 aircraft. By repeatedly going back to his senior leadership, Chedister knew he was risking his job and possibly his career. But he knew that if he didn't go back, the true cost of the program would still come out. As a postscript, Chedister was promoted twice more and retired as a major general commanding the Air Armament Center at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

Having Courage

Unfortunately, such examples of courage in the acquisition line of fire are the exceptions rather than the rule. In our environment, there are tremendous institutional pressures to remain silent and go with the flow of direction coming down from senior management. After all, acquisition organizations are nothing more than military bureaucracies in a light disguise. As such, they conform to a hierarchical chain of command that has, as its basic premise, top-down control. But that leads to organizations where subordinates rarely, if ever, confront their superiors with a difference of opinion, even on important matters. A retired major general commented on this climate in a March 19, 2006,

op-ed piece in the *New York Times*: "I've seen a climate of groupthink become dominant and a growing reluctance by experienced military men and civilians to challenge the notions of senior leadership."

So what does it take to break this climate of groupthink? It's simple: It takes the courage to raise your hand and speak the truth. That sounds simple but can actually involve taking considerable personal and career risk. Failure to take such risk, however, is a sign of weak leadership. Such failure is also noticed by the rest of the team and organization, making them more reluctant to take risks.

In addition to speaking up to senior management, it is equally important for good acquisition leaders to create open and trusting environments in their organizations where subordinates can speak to them. There is no better example of this than a plaque I recently noticed at the Valley Forge National Historic Site near George Washington's headquarters. During this extremely difficult winter encampment, Washington could have easily taken total control. But he didn't. In fact, he allowed and even encouraged open debate among his staff. As the plaque stated, "His officers deeply respected him, but their conversation was not constrained by deference."

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In our environment, there are tremendous institutional pressures to remain silent and go with the flow of direction coming down from senior management.

So, would you raise your hand?

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